Michael Fields
Agricultural Institute
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Jerome Laloux, Lille, France
Nathan Rousseau, Green Bay, WI
Chad Sevey, Chicago, IL
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Message from the Executive Director

It takes time to convert a farm from conventional chemical-intensive methods to organic. It also takes time to change the societal paradigms, such as those regarding food production, food quality, and the value of small farms. Food is the most basic of needs; it decides not just the health of the individual, but also the health of a community.

In the thirty years since it’s founding in 1984, Michael Fields Agricultural Institute has had an impact on food and farming systems. This has happened with each successive class of farmers participating in the Whole Farm Workshops, with each change to state and federal conservation policy, and with each seed planted by the research department. Thirty years of research, education, and public policy by the Institute and its staff have helped shape the rural landscape seed-by-seed, row-by-row, consumer-by-consumer, and farm-by-farm so that now the demand for organic grain, vegetables, beef and dairy is greater than the supply. Community Supported Agriculture and Eat Local are common household terms and posh restaurants, as well as, road-side markets boast local, organic produce in their menus and available on their market stands.

While we celebrated “30 Years” at a special event in late September we also took time in May and June to honor two strong-willed ladies, Martina Mann and Ruth Zinniker, two of the original three founders who set us on our course and challenged us to succeed. In celebrating the present, we will be honoring the past that set the stage for growth that has brought us this far.

While some things change with time, one constant is farmers are getting older and older, and there are fewer and fewer beginning farmers to replace them. The most ecologically sound farming methods require more attention to detail. If the consumer values a local food system that builds soil and protects our natural resources, we need to reverse the trend towards fewer farmers and bigger farms. Michael Fields Agricultural Institute continues to focus on the connection between a close-knit community which desires nutrient dense locally produced fruits and vegetables and the local farmers who produce the food. Yes, there is work to be done, but the work extends to the fields and the farms, so the Institute lives as much beyond its walls as within them.

What unifies the vast body of Michael Fields Agricultural Institute’s activity are the collaborations that are local, national and international in scope. As an educational and research organization, we are a learning center where people from varied backgrounds learn how to provide food while preserving the community, the environment and financial sustainability for all.

The future is bright and although the past thirty years seems to have flown by in the wink an eye we really are just getting started. Society is waking up and beginning to learn the dance that will lead all of us to a brighter future.

David Andrews, Executive Director
Michael Fields Agricultural Institute
RESEARCH

Innovating Sustainable Farming Systems- Starting from Seed

Michael Fields is exploring and developing a new model for agriculture. With over 240 acres, research is a key component of our work, and something that makes us different from many nonprofits in the field of sustainable agriculture. We are investigating cropping systems, cover crop strategies and corn variety development. As we design and implement our research program, we seek to engage all types of farmers, whether they practice conventional, organic or biodynamic agriculture. The program is in the process of fully integrating with the education program to ensure research-based knowledge reaches the public in an expedient manor.

Cover Crop Promotion

Cover crops help build soil health, suppress pests and will be a key component of climate change mitigation. Our goal is to increase cover crop adoption across the broad landscape so work to develop best management practices that are practical and profitable while providing the ecosystem benefits that go far beyond the farm.

In 2014 we initiated work in cover crop strategies for organic transition and reinvigoration, organic quack grass control as well as cultural studies of Sunn hemp, a possible new cover crop for Wisconsin which has broad application. We also laid the groundwork for the MFAI Cover Crops Initiative, an integrated research/outreach project which will address information gaps in the research base to develop recommendations which will be used in a broad educational/advocacy campaign to increase cover crop adoption in Southern Wisconsin and Northern Illinois.

Corn Research

The goal of Michael Field’s long-standing organic breeding program is to restore genetic diversity to this ancient American crop, whose genes have been impoverished by years of transgenic manipulation and short-sighted corporate control. In 2014, our research program harvested over 100 lines of non-GMO (genetically modified) corn.

We are making progress in developing new, unique corn varieties not duplicated in the private sector but needed by the organic sector. We continue to emphasize grain quality including overall protein content and better amino acid profiles but have also ramped up work on selecting for gametophytic incompatibility, a trait which will protect organic hybrids from GMO contamination to maintain the integrity of the organic market.

Cropping Systems Research

We continue our work to establish a meaningful long-term research trial comparing conventional, organic and biodynamic farming systems. 2014 represented the second year of transition to organic certification. The trial will be initiated in 2016 once we’ve achieved organic and biodynamic certification.

Dr. Jim Stute joined the Institute as Research Director in early 2014. His research interests include developing cover crop best management practices and using cover crops for pest suppression. Originally from Madison, he earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in Agronomy from UW-Madison and is a Certified Professional Agronomist. Prior to coming to the Institute, he was the UW-Extension Crops and Soils Educator in Rock County where he programmed in nutrient and pest management. For the past 20 years he has also farmed on the family farm near East Troy and cover crops are an integral part of the operation.
Training the Next Generation of Sustainable Farmers

Michael Fields’ education program is fostering the next generation of local food champions—sustainable farmers, gardener innovators, consumers and advocates. We believe the culture in agriculture needs revitalizing, creating a place for lively discussions, learning, feeding both the soul and the imagination, and cultivating community.

Whole Farm Workshops

The Michael Fields Whole Farm Workshop series teaches new and experienced farmers and gardeners the skills they need to take their agricultural passions and careers to the next level. In 2014, we scheduled 20 Whole Farm Workshops, for which we registered 244 participants.

For the professional farmer, topics include production methods (season extension, weed control, pest management, and seed saving), financial literacy, permaculture, biodynamic agriculture, tractor safety and market development. We also have offerings for anyone who seeks to explore the links between good food and living, including beekeeping, pastured poultry, and growing fruits.

These workshops are made possible by a grant from the USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Development Program in collaboration with Angelic AOrganices and Prairie Crossing. The UW Extension also provides workshop presenters.

Wisconsin Cover Crop Conference

The Institute held the inaugural conference in March at the Wisconsin Dells with the theme “Your Farm- Your Future”. This annual conference brings together farmers, agency personnel, industry professionals and researchers to share the latest cover crop information and ideas. Ninety-two individuals participated in 2014 and 77 continuing education credits were awarded. This conference is a joint effort of the Michael Fields Institute and Wisconsin Natural Resources Conservation Service.

The Gardens @ Michael Fields

The Gardens were designed as a place to teach new farmers the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in agriculture today. For the last 17 years students have come from all over the US and the world to learn, grow and experience all Michael Fields has to offer. The students learn skills such as transplanting and cultivation, greenhouse management, organic standards, and the importance of good records.

One of our on-going goals is to expose more people to the benefits of the local food system. We are constantly reaching out to the surrounding communities with events such as our Pizza Night and our Worker Share and Volunteer programs where we meet new people and answer questions they might have about local foods and organic farming. We continue to look for ways to extend the growing season and make it possible to “eat local” 12 months a year. 2014 included exposure to value-added products such as our pepper jelly and pickled vegetables. While it wasn’t all for sale, it did provided the students first-hand experience preserving their harvest.

The Gardens work regularly with community groups bringing farm experience to people with special needs. Twice a week a group of VIP in Elkhorn, WI came to help weed, mulch or transplant. The gardens also sponsored 2 students from Shepherds College, Union Grove, WI, the WI School for the Deaf, Delavan and East Troy FFA (Future Farmers of America) Students.

In 2014, Christine Welcher joined the staff at Michael Fields as the Garden Manager. She comes with a background in business and time spent farming as a single woman. Her goals for The Gardens are to reinvigorate the student program and expose more people to the benefits of local food.
EMPOWER

Activating Grassroots Support for Profitable, Environmentally Sound, Socially Responsible Agriculture

Michael Field’s public policy program works at the state and national levels to engage grassroots support for sustainable agriculture and to build capacity for the sustainable agriculture movement. Working with many diverse coalitions of stakeholders, we empower people to use, shape and advocate for programs that benefit farmers, consumers, communities and the land.

Impacting Public Policy

Despite difficult political terrain in Wisconsin and nationally, in 2014 we advanced our sustainable agriculture policy agenda in multiple areas.

At the Federal level, we helped coordinate the national appropriations campaign for Fiscal Year 2015, the passage of the 2014 Farm Bill, the effort to generate public comments on the Food Safety Modernization Act, and efforts to optimize the use and implementation of the Conservation Stewardship Program. We also generated comments from farmers, eaters, and other stakeholders to let the U.S. Food and Drug Administration know how crucial it is to make some specific changes to their new food safety rules.

At the State level, we advanced Wisconsin policies that increase market access, conservation, funding capacity for managed grazing, research and outreach, farmland preservation, and community food security, though many of these efforts were encumbered by the state’s extreme political and budget climate. We laid groundwork to protect funding in the 2015-2016 budget process for the Buy Local Buy Wisconsin and Farm to School programs, which MFAI helped establish, and funding for local conservation staff to help farmers develop and implement conservation practices. Funding for all three program areas will be at risk in the upcoming budget. We also took on the policy lead for the Wisconsin Local Food Network, providing advocacy opportunities for good, local food supporters in the state.

Building the Sustainable Agriculture Movement

Michael Fields plays a key role in building the movement for sustainable agriculture, including increasing diversity and growing the next generation of advocates.

Through the Community and Regional Food Systems Project’s City Exchange Project collaboration, of which we’re a part, MFAI has created opportunities for community partners nationwide to engage in community food systems-focused conversations around policy strategies, social and racial equity issues in the nation’s food system, and youth engagement.

We have also helped lead the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition exploration of ways to increase its collaborative relationships with multi-cultural farming organizations and communities to create change on a grand scale.
STATEMENT OF FINANCIAL POSITION
December 31, 2014 and 2013

ASSETS

CURRENT ASSETS

- Cash: $84,878 ($168,016)
- Unconditional promises to give: $200,000
- Receivables: $89,853 ($49,999)
- Prepaid Expenses: $57,579 ($7,789)
- Total Current Assets: $432,310 ($225,804)

Property and Equipment - Net: $3,320,482 ($1,895,847)
Indiana Farm Land - Donation: $1,516,610

Total Assets: $3,752,792 ($3,638,261)

LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS

CURRENT LIABILITIES

- Current Portion of Notes Payable: $221,513 ($116,513)
- Accounts Payable: $15,417 ($9,702)
- Accrued Payroll and Taxes: $4,419 ($6,994)
- Total Current Liabilities: $241,349 ($133,209)

LONG-TERM LIABILITIES

- Long-Term Debt net of Current Portion: $309,621 ($320,917)
- Total Liabilities: $550,970 ($454,126)

NET ASSETS

- Unrestricted: $2,898,164 ($1,550,211)
- Temporarily Restricted: $303,658 ($91,597)
- Change in Net Assets: $17,687 ($1,542,327)
- Total Net Assets: $3,201,822 ($3,184,135)

TOTAL LIABILITIES AND NET ASSETS: $3,752,792 ($3,638,261)

Michael Fields Agricultural Institute wishes to thank all the individuals and partners who make our work possible through their generous support. From financial gifts to in-kind support and the gift of your time and energy, we could not do this work without you.
We are grateful to the foundations and institutions who provided financial support for our work in 2014:

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RSF Social Finance
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USDA Agricultural Research Service
USDA Agriculture and Food Research Initiative
USDA Beginning Farmer and Rancher Program
USDA Rural Business Enterprise Grant Program
USDA Natural Resource Conservation Service

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Wisconsin Farmers Union
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